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SUBJECT: ROMANIA: SORRY STATE OF EDUCATION A SUMMERTIME STAPLE

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Education has dominated the headlines of Romanian papers since early July as a public clash has played out between President Traian Basescu and Minister of Education Ecaterina Andronescu (PSD). The Ministry of Education's (MOE) recent decision to close three private universities to new students, while at the same time cancelling thousands of diplomas, has thrown Romanian higher education into turmoil. One of the three universities, Bucharest-based Spiru Haret University (SHU), is the largest and richest private university in Romania, with campuses and distance-learning programs scattered throughout the country and offered overseas. Trading punches over education is an easy way to score points in a presidential election year, and real or perceived scandals will likely continue to dominate the headlines throughout the fall. Underscoring the debate are serious questions as to the government's role in higher education and the extent to which schools are preparing young Romanians for a competitive labor market. Too often the traditionalist mindsets of educators, politicians, and entrenched special interests have conspired to stymie reforms to make education more relevant to the needs of students and employers. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) Responding to President Basescu's recent public lambasting of Romanian education as being "not related to the labor market" and offering "no guarantee of a quality education," EconOff met with outside stakeholders to ask whether or not Romanian education is, in fact, preparing students for work in multinational enterprises. The consistent message was that Romanian universities are aware of the gap between the education on offer and labor market requirements, but find reform difficult. Tenured--and often politically connected--university professors have a tendency to resist any encroachment on their turf, especially if this means changing curricula or staffing patterns. As the Fulbright Commission's Educational Advisor simply put it, "the teaching methodology is outdated," noting that in many cases the same curricula from the immediate post-communist period is still in use today. Multinational employers likewise complain that few Romanian students possess the "whole package" of skills necessary to compete in a globalized economy. While many students graduate with superb language or technical abilities, the same students often don't possess both competencies and these skills are not always balanced by the ability to work effectively on a team. Programs offered by Junior Achievement, the American Chamber of Commerce, and others, such as the post-supported START internship program (reftel), help in this regard but they are insufficient for developing marketplace-relevant skills without being reinforced as a standard part of university curricula.

¶3. (SBU) Muddying the picture further is the yawning quality gap between public and private universities. Traditionally the best universities in Romania are those run by the state, with top students competing for government-subsidized seats at public

schools. A limited number of less competitive but still academically qualified students have the option of paying tuition to enter state universities. The state sector, however, has failed to expand enough to meet the demand for university degrees, leaving the marketplace open to private schools operating exclusively on a tuition basis. With all funding coming from students and no quality standards to meet beyond maintaining accreditation, private schools have every incentive to make earning a degree as painless as possible for their paying customers. While public schools are often criticized for offering impractical and overly theoretical training, the criticism of private schools is that they enroll unmotivated students without requiring them to achieve even basic mastery of the subject matter, as long as fees are paid on time.

¶4. (SBU) The MOE is at the forefront of the education debate because of its role as quality arbiter in the system. The "basic law" on education recognizes the existence of "organizations which are providers of education" but leaves formal accreditation to the national authorities. Educational organizations (which could be religious groups or private investors) are initially allowed to organize higher-education undergraduate programs and enroll students, but are not allowed to issue diplomas or call themselves universities. Only after a lengthy assessment by the Romanian Agency for Assuring Quality in Higher Education (ARACIS) are they accredited. ARACIS, however, does not have the final word on accreditation decisions; politicians do. Formal accreditation requires the assent of the Cabinet of Ministers followed by an Act of Parliament. Accreditation allows schools to issue diplomas which will be recognized by the MOE, an important consideration since the MOE must attest to the validity of all Romanian diplomas. Institutional accreditation does not automatically confer accreditation on all academic programs offered by a school. Some private schools have been known to fudge the issue and use their institutional accreditation to issue diplomas even for unaccredited

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programs. Currently 56 state and 32 accredited private universities are operating in Romania, with an additional 24 private groups currently seeking formal accreditation.

¶5. (U) The MOE's involvement in ostensibly independent schools caused an outcry when Bucharest-based SHU and two smaller private schools had their right to enroll students this fall summarily pulled by the MOE on July 6th. MOE officials announced that a number of SHU programs were operating without accreditation, especially the "distance-learning" programs which have proliferated since 2002, the year when the university obtained full accreditation. (Note: SHU began in 2002 with only four departments and today has 30. It enrolls roughly 312,000 out of the 700,000 private school students in Romania and pockets at least 100 million euro annually from tuition fees. End note.) Minister Andronescu has backpedalled from her initial announcement that the SHU's failings were so extreme that all previously issued diplomas would be cancelled, and an investigation as to which, if any, diplomas should be cancelled is underway. Even so, the shadow cast on private universities (which the press has taken to calling diploma mills) has raised questions about the extent to which SHU and other universities are motivated more by profit than educational quality.

¶6. (U) According to the MOE, SHU's request to certify 56,000 graduation diplomas this year--a figure that almost matched the 60,000 students enrolled in the state system--led to the realization that more than 100,000 diplomas had been issued by SHU for programs that lacked official accreditation. Threatened with having their degrees invalidated, SHU graduates throughout the political establishment put pressure on Andronescu to back off, accusing her of holding SHU to the letter of the law as a political move during an election year. President Basescu added fuel to the fire, criticizing her management of the education system and adding that Romanian universities, both public and private, have become "production departments that generate diplomas." Ultimately cooler heads prevailed and SHU's accredited programs will reopen this fall, with SHU further agreeing to obtain accreditation for the full suite of courses it offers. At the same time, the fight over whether or not private universities should be subject to government regulations

continues, with SHU filing a lawsuit asserting that the Government has no authority to judge the validity of diplomas.

¶ 17. (U) The other two private universities banned from enrolling students are based in the northeastern city of Iasi. In 2003, University "Petre Andrei" (UPA) and University "Apollonia" (UA) attempted to merge only one year after each was accredited. The MOE claimed the merger was illegal and suspended the accreditation of the two universities. This caused a split, with some departments in UPA electing a new rector, Doru Tompea, while other departments joined UA and continued to fight the MOE's decision. This breakaway group elected their own rector, Niculae Niculescu, and asserted that they had a right to the UPA name. Under Romanian law, the MOE confirms rectors at all universities, both public and private. Stepping into the fray, the Ministry recognized Tompea but has refused to accept Niculescu's appointment.

¶ 18. (U) Taking the battle to the courts, Niculescu and Tompea have fought over who represents UPA, with most decisions going in Tompea's favor. Niculescu has argued that the MOE should have no jurisdiction over the appointment of rectors at private universities, a position that he lost on appeal to the Constitutional Court, which ruled that the MOE's authority over both public and private schools is enshrined in the "basic law" on education. Under this law, the Romanian Parliament defined university autonomy in such a way that the MOE maintains oversight over the appointment of all rectors. This decision cannot be appealed, though Parliament could amend the law at a later date.

¶ 19. (SBU) Comment. The SHU and UPA cases illustrate how intimately involved the authorities are in the management of private universities. The existence of private schools is unsurprising, given employers' demand for university diplomas and the limited number of places available at state schools. Ultimately the question for Romania is a basic one of setting quality standards for universities, both state-run and private. As long as vested interests resist ranking systems (even student associations are implacably opposed, fearing the devaluation of their degrees), the MOE--not the market--is left in the middle making quality judgments.

This has become harder to do as private universities have grown larger, richer, and more politically connected. Absent competitive pressure from public schools to offer students a better quality education than what they could get for free, private schools remain all too willing to trade cash for diplomas. End comment.

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